
Untitled (One Day This Kid . . .), by David Wojnarowicz

When I was told that I'd contracted this virus it didn't take me long to realize that I'd contracted a diseased society as well.

David Wojnarowicz¹

The artist, writer, photographer, performer, filmmaker, and activist David Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992. He was 37 years old. AIDS was the last of a series of traumas that Wojnarowicz experienced over the course of his short life. As a child he was sexually and physically abused; during adolescence he survived periods of homelessness and drug use; and as an adult he repeatedly confronted homophobia and AIDS discrimination, one of the most intense episodes of which included the withdrawal of funding by the National Endowment for the Arts for an exhibition that featured his photography and writing. Perhaps because of his intimacy with both physical and psychic suffering, Wojnarowicz was able to create artwork that was renowned for its uncompromising rage and magnificent tenderness.

Rage and tenderness are both very evident in this image, *Untitled (One Day This Kid . . .)*, one of a pair of pieces created by Wojnarowicz in 1990 as a response to the issue of homophobia. (In the companion work he substitutes an image of a young girl for

that of the young boy and revises the text accordingly.) The impact of the piece is achieved through its deceptively simple juxtaposition of a rather unremarkable photograph with text that reads more like a list than a polemic.

We take in the photograph first. The all-American, Norman Rockwell-like boy, with his patterned shirt, suspenders, neat haircut, and buck-toothed smile, is delightful. By selecting an image that alludes to “more innocent” times, Wojnarowicz accomplishes the first of a series of appropriations from the discourses of political, cultural, and religious conservatives. Through the text he reveals that this child is the meeting point for a clash of forces as fundamental as the forces of nature, forces “equivalent to the separation of the earth from its axis.” This is no less than the conflict between desire and repression.

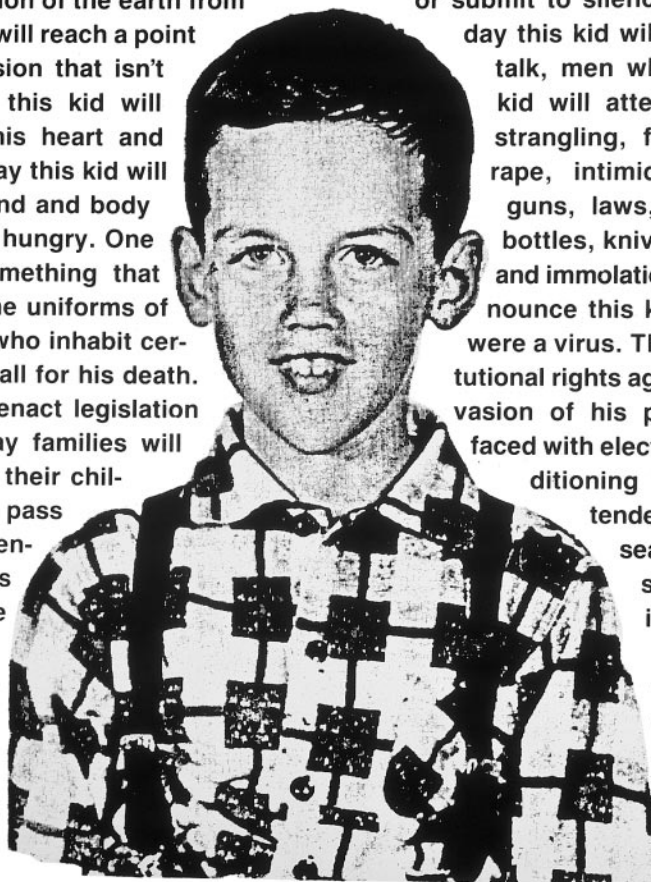
The photograph is of the young Wojnarowicz. While there is an autobiographical truth to the work, and his presence provides a certain “empirical reality” to the piece, Wojnarowicz is clearly intent on avoiding the limitations of autobiography. Rather than narrowing the viewer's response to sympathy for himself, Wojnarowicz is intent on mobilizing widespread concern for the violent childhoods experienced by so many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

By structuring the text as he does—providing a list of abuses punctuated by a final, revelatory sentence supposed to explain why the child is subject to the violence described—Wojnarowicz both evokes and inverts the conservative argument that homosexuality is a threat to the safety of children. The hurt comes not from the desire “to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy” but from acts of hatred—hatred sanctioned by religious condemnation, supported by legislation, and reinforced by medical pronouncements and therapies.

This argument is most fully accomplished in the emotional force of the piece. The enormous energy in the image comes from the suspense generated by the future tense: “One day this kid will. . . .” As a result, we experience the piece as we do a performance, over time. We are placed in 2 temporalities, witnessing what will happen while knowing that it has already happened. Like the image itself, captured by the text, we are trapped in the narrative inevitability of the piece. The experience is like heading toward a collision, knowing that it has already happened and that it will be repeated endlessly unless there is some intervention.

This particular form of suspense—anticipation of an outcome over which we have little control but which we are compelled to

One day this kid will get larger. One day this kid will come to know something that causes a sensation equivalent to the separation of the earth from its axis. One day this kid will reach a point where he senses a division that isn't mathematical. One day this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth. One day this kid will find something in his mind and body and soul that makes him hungry. One day this kid will do something that causes men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, to call for his death. One day politicians will enact legislation against this kid. One day families will give false information to their children and each child will pass that information down generationally to their families and that information will be designed to make existence intolerable for this kid. One day this kid will begin to experience all this activity in his environment and that activi-



ty and information will compel him to commit suicide or submit to danger in hopes of being murdered or submit to silence and invisibility. Or one day this kid will talk. When he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will attempt to silence him with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation, and immolation by fire. Doctors will pronounce this kid curable as if his brain were a virus. This kid will lose his constitutional rights against the government's invasion of his privacy. This kid will be faced with electro-shock, drugs, and conditioning therapies in laboratories tended by psychologists and research scientists. He will be subject to loss of home, civil rights, jobs, and all conceivable freedoms. All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.

David Wojnarowicz 1990/91

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992), *Untitled (One Day This Kid . . .)*, 1990. Reprinted with permission of the estate of David Wojnarowicz, with thanks to P.P.O.W.

witness—is much like watching a horror movie. And horror is certainly Wojnarowicz's focus, the horror of being trapped in a "diseased society." Perhaps our experience of the image will provide us with some foundation for identifying with or empathizing with the nameless "kid" in the piece.

It is difficult to justify inaction when we are moved to rage and tenderness simultaneously. By arguing his point in the form of this image, Wojnarowicz is able to add an emotional logic to argument. This is where the use of the future tense establishes the final force of the piece. We live in the aftermath of the vi-

olence described in the text, and we end our encounter with the work as we began it. "This kid" still looks out at us, only now he is representative not of the innocent youth of days gone by but of gay youths who have already confronted or will one day confront the same list of abuses.

As we face the future beyond the image, we must consider our response. Are we simply going to watch, or will we intervene? Perhaps, one day . . . ? □

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This editorial was accepted February 16, 2001.

Reference

1. Wojnarowicz D. "Postcards from America X-rays From Hell." In: Wojnarowicz D. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. New York, NY: Vintage Books; 1991:111–137.